

Not The Monster by Robertdoc

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Summary:

[SPOILER ALERT]

Three weeks after the gate is closed, and one week before the Snowball, El finally gets the chance to meet an awake and well Will Byers for the very first time in our dimension. A bonus chapter also gives her the chance to catch up with his mother as well.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Spoilers lie ahead for much of Stranger Things S2, especially the ending. Second chapter will come shortly.

“I want to see Will.”

Jim Hopper was certainly well accustomed to hearing most of those words from Eleven. The biggest and only difference this time was the last one.

Maybe since she actually had seen Mike recently, she was more willing to request someone else for the first time. But he eventually understood it wasn't just that.

Even though it was theoretically possible to let El see more people now, if only for a little while, there wasn't that much time to test it. Between cleaning up the cabin, recovering from the latest near apocalypse, compromising on what not to bring up during El's recent...absence, and waiting for Dr. Owens to keep his promises while Hawkins Lab got cleared out, Hopper still couldn't be *that* flexible about expanding El's social time.

Nonetheless, he knew he couldn't get away with not letting El see Mike. If only by letting him visit for one hour on three separate days over the last three weeks. Besides, if there was still a chance Hopper could make a certain...guest appearance at a certain school dance happen, it would be best to let them spend *some* time together first.

Yet three weeks after the gate closed, El hadn't asked about Mike or the Snowball. She asked about getting to see Will. Not Dustin or Lucas, or that new girl that Hopper now knew better about bringing up in front of El.

She brought up the boy she had saved twice in the last two years, and had still never actually talked to. At least not in this dimension.

As connected as they had been, and as much as El had done for Will, they had never really properly been introduced. Somehow, El had been thinking about that and wanted to fix it, now that it might be possible.

And maybe now it could be. Within reason.

God and Hop knew all too well that Joyce and Will needed their space after that night. For all too obvious and separate reasons. But maybe after three weeks, it wouldn't be a strictly painful reminder to have El see them.

And perhaps Hopper could even take the risk of bringing El over to visit them. And leave her along with them. Without him around – for just an hour.

On the off chance Owens did make contact in time to make El's Snowball fantasy come true, Hopper figured he'd need to be prepared by then. At least enough to let El be around people who weren't him – this time with his permission first. This might serve as the best practice run he could get.

Besides, it wasn't like he would leave her there without an adult.

Even if Joyce still wasn't...back at full strength yet, she was still the person Hopper could trust the most to watch over El for a while. Granted, no other adult or person was really an option, both then and now.

Nevertheless, even if other adults were an option, Joyce would still be the only person other than himself that he'd trust to protect his...almost daughter.

Maybe once or twice, he had wished Joyce's help was an option back then too. At least on those one or two trips to the lab where hiding the truth from her was especially tough. And once Joyce was somewhat near full strength again, there was no doubt he had a ton of questions and a few shoulder slaps coming from her about all the things – and people – he never mentioned to her this last year.

But for whatever reason, good or bad, those questions didn't come

when Hopper raised his idea to her. They had to do it in person, on the off chance that not every survivor from the lab's phone tapping department had moved away yet.

Other than that, it was like setting up a normal play date. Between two kids who had survived terrible abuse in multiple dimensions. One of which had super powers, while the other had just finished being possessed by a mind frying shadow monster.

Other than that, perfectly normal.

XX

As instructed, El laid down in the back seat of Hopper's police truck on Saturday afternoon, so no one would see her. As instructed, she was extra quiet on the ride over, then got out without a sound when he parked at the Byers' house, and walked in front of him while he covered her way to the door.

She had learned her lesson lately about questioning how he protected her from the world. At least when she knew she'd still get to see someone later anyway.

She had been given an extra special promise that he wouldn't have to do this much longer. "Very soon" this time, and not just soon. It was easier to believe him now, and not just because Mike had been allowed to see her again.

And not just because El was allowed to see other people too. Including someone she'd only ever seen in the Void, or sleeping in his bed.

It was only now, after she'd finally seen Mike, that she thought more about how much she missed and wanted to see her other friends soon. And how much she wanted to see the others she didn't know as well, but wanted to know better.

And how much she wanted to finally know the person she'd saved twice, without ever really talking to him. The person who was Mike and Dustin and Lucas's best friend, and Joyce's son – and who'd been hurt by the bad men and the Upside Down almost as much as she

had.

After all that, it was time she at least met him and made sure he was okay.

Hopper promised she could, and he was keeping his promises now. But he also promised he would be back to pick her up in one hour, and not a second later. So whatever she hoped would happen from this visit, she'd have to do it quickly.

Not quite as quick as when Joyce opened the door, got her inside and closed the door behind her immediately. But still quick.

When that was done, Joyce slowed down to greet El with a hug. Just like three weeks ago, right down to calling her sweetheart. Except this time it wasn't for the first time El saw her in a year, and it didn't come right after seeing...that other girl. Or right before seeing a sleeping Will and volunteering to close a gate.

This time there was nothing to distract El, and nothing to try and block out. This time she could better savor being hugged, by one of the only two adults to ever hug her like they really cared about her. And this time when it was over, she could go to Will's room and see him while he was awake.

Joyce said he was waiting in there for her, and that she'd let them be alone but that she wouldn't be too far. She sounded a little bit nervous, but far less than she did in the other times El had talked to her. She actually sounded nervous like Hopper did when he told her about this visit – like he was trying real hard not to sound nervous about leaving her alone, but a part of him still did. Not a lot, but just enough that even El could understand it.

El told herself if Joyce sounded like that too, it was because she wasn't ready all the way to leave Will alone with a stranger after what happened. Not that she was afraid to leave him alone with *her*. She was one of the very few people she'd ever known who didn't think of her like that. At least she thought she was.

If that hadn't changed now, it would if she didn't get along with Will. Now that El was really going to talk to him, there was a chance that

might happen.

What if he realized by now that nothing would have ever happened to him if El never left the lab? What if he blamed her for Mike missing her so much this last year too? What if he told Mike that and then he finally blamed her and then he....

Somehow, El made herself stop asking these questions before she broke a window, or made a chair fly, or destroyed half the house. If she could do that much, maybe there was still hope.

Even better, Joyce didn't seem to notice, as she brought her to Will's door without flinching or anything.

"All right. I'll be right outside," Joyce told her. "If there's anything you need at all, or if there's anything Will needs, you just come out and let me know. Okay?"

It took El right back to school a year ago, before the first time he contacted Will. When Joyce called her brave and thanked her, and didn't threaten her or make her feel afraid before putting her in the bath. And although she needed her to do something very important, she made her feel like her own safety and feelings still mattered anyway. Even though she knew what she was, what she could do and what she'd done.

Until Hopper found her, no other adult who really knew her ever made El feel like that and meant it. Until Hopper found her, she had accepted that no other adult ever would. And that she'd never meet another kid besides Mike, Dustin and Lucas who would either.

But now here she was anyway. Remembering that and so much more, just from hearing those kind words again, from an adult who she *knew* cared about her and was thankful for her...it was enough.

"Okay," she responded. "I'm ready."

XX

After Joyce walked away, El raised her hand up to knock. Out of habit, she used Hopper's secret knock sequence, even though it didn't really apply here.

Yet either way, it worked to make the door open for her. But this time, the one on the other side was Will.

El was now seeing a fully healthy, fully awake and fully aware Will for the first time ever. She saw him step back to let her come into the room, and then saw him close the door before leaving it open just a bit. She then saw him look at her for what felt like a whole hour, studying her while still looking a bit nervous...yet El sensed he wasn't nervous because of her. Not in the terrible way she was used to, anyway.

Shy was one of the new words she'd learned this year that sounded right. Before she could try to remember others, Will spoke one of his own.

"Eleven?" he asked. Yet before El could answer, he asked, "I mean, El?" Finally he settled on, "What do you want me to call you?"

There was another name for her that would fit. But he didn't know about that. No one in Hawkins other than Hopper or Joyce did. And after Chicago, El was far less sure about using it now. So she decided to use the name Will's friends knew best.

"El," she finally answered him. She then thought about how he asked her what *she* wanted to be called in the first place, and added a "Thank you" for it.

Will went back to just looking at her quietly, until he said, "You look....different." El looked down at the new pair of overalls Hopper got her, which were certainly different from her Chicago clothes but nicer than the ones she'd had all year. She wondered if it really was different in a good way after all, until Will spoke up again.

"No, not different bad! I mean....wait, hold on!" Will suddenly came to life and rushed to open a drawer, muttering some things El couldn't quite hear. Soon enough, he more loudly said, "Yes, I knew it was still here!" then turned around with a large piece of paper in his hands.

"The guys told me so much about you when I came back. The first time," Will clarified. "Then I asked Dustin and Lucas to be more

specific, about how you looked and all. Since I thought back then I'd never get to meet you, I thought drawing you was the best I could do."

He held out the paper for her, and once El took it, he added, "I just got this from what *they* said. If they got it wrong, you can tell me."

But they really didn't.

It was her. Or rather, the old El. The El with shaved hair, a blue coat, Nancy's dress...everything from a year ago. Maybe it didn't look exactly like her in every way, but it was almost as close as all the endless memories she lived on for a year. Even the most faded and worn ones.

"Pretty..." El heard herself whispering. Back to a time when that was the strongest word she knew. When Mike said it in an even prettier voice. When she still thought she was bad, when she didn't know about friends or family, when she couldn't even imagine more...bitching clothes or anything like that.

When things were so much simpler in both good and bad ways.

"Do you like it?" Will got her attention back. El tried to find the right way to say yes. Yet for all the words she now knew, none of them felt like quite enough to really describe it. However, whatever face she was making instead seemed to make Will understand and smile.

"Good thing I finished before my episodes really started," Will added. "And maybe now I won't have to hide it when Mike's here anymore."

"Why did you hide it from him?" El asked, as Will flashed back to Mike's depressed, angry attitude around anything and anyone remotely El-related since New Years – especially since Max was discovered – just when he thought it was all over.

"Nothing important," Will quickly deflected. "So, um, did you get to draw at Hopper's place?"

El could only shake her head. "Watched TV. Learned word of the day. Didn't do anything stupid. For a while."

“Couldn’t have been that bad. Compared to other dumb things,” Will said with a touch of something sad at the end. El didn’t feel like comparing their dumb things, at least not out loud, and Will didn’t sound like he wanted to either.

“But I threw out everything I drew about them. Monsters, vines, tunnels, maps, that sort of thing,” Will said. “I’ve been going through the happy stuff I drew before then. Maybe it’ll help me draw good things again now. I think it’s been going okay so far, do you wanna see?”

Once El agreed, Will showed her a whole collection of his favorite pre-Upside Down drawings. A few of them reminded her of the board games Mike and the guys showed her, which made Will really light up as he explained their inspiration. But he let her know they’d been playing most of their games at the arcade lately – and after explaining what that was, Will assured they’d really teach her about it once she could go out again.

After getting back to his drawings, Will wound up reflecting about how all this ‘freak’ stuff was really helping after all, like his brother said. At least when he wasn’t at school and wasn’t being haunted by monsters. It almost made him glad his dad hadn’t been there to ‘help’ too.

“Your Papa? Bad man?” El asked.

“I guess. I mean, not like...” Will began and almost made the mistake of finishing. But by then, El could sense who Will was going to bring up, and Will almost kicked himself for even trying to do it in front of her. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to...you don’t have to say anything!”

“It’s okay,” El tried to push it aside.

“Not really, but...” Will reflected on each of their bad papas once more, before settling on a better way to look at it. “But my dad’s not here, and your first one is *long* gone, so it all worked out.”

El tried really hard not to think about the first one. Or more specifically, add to the doubt...Chicago gave her about where he *really* was now. Thankfully, Will interrupted by saying, “And at least

your new one's far better than them now anyway. Even if he didn't teach you to draw."

It wasn't long ago that El really doubted that. Looking back, she wishes she thought to tell Hopper he was really nothing like Papa on the way to the lab. Maybe she should remember to say it on the way back home, or some other time soon.

Maybe she should have told him a couple other things about Chicago too. But for now, not telling him wasn't the same as lying. It couldn't be right now.

Either way, Will got back to his drawings, showing El a few new ones that did look as pretty and happy as the older ones. He even suggested that she ask Hopper to buy her crayons and pencils the next time he went shopping, so she could bring them and Will could help her use them the next time she came over.

As Will went on with his offer, El reflected on the last time someone her age offered to teach her something. Unlike a few moments ago, this time she didn't stop herself before thinking directly about... Chicago.

Her sister.

A sister who didn't quite go through the exact same things El did, but they were close enough. Close enough that it made her angry and violent, ready to kill for revenge no matter what, and made her teach El to be angry and vengeful too. And it actually worked.

While she was closing a gate, anyway. After that, when she really thought about it and how it made her feel...how different it was then and now...

But now she was with someone else who didn't quite go through the exact same things El did, but they were close enough. Close enough that it...made him try to draw and have fun to recover, reach out to someone he didn't know, and made him try to teach her something fun instead of deadly.

Being angry gave her a real satisfying feeling at first, and doing this

had that kind of instant feeling too. But somehow, in a way El couldn't sort out quite yet, it felt...different. Something that felt...less than before, but something that made her feel much more too.

It made El feel more like smiling as she looked through more of Will's new drawings. She then got to one that was mostly blank, except for a few words, a face and a cape below it.

She read out loud "Bob Newby. Superhero" before Will suddenly put a bunch of papers over it. "That's not finished," he said with far less joy than before.

"Not finished?" El questioned.

"That's what I said! And don't let Mom see it either!" Will snapped, sounding almost as angry as Lucas in the junkyard. Or Hopper in the cabin. El instinctively cringed at the connection and at Will's anger, which actually made Will look less angry.

"I'm sorry...but you shouldn't have looked, but you...!" Will went from sad to angry to sad again in seconds, until he finally took his arms off the drawing. Although she still wasn't sure it was really okay to see it now, El peeked a little bit to try and figure out what was so bad before.

"Bob..." El read again, trying to remember why it sounded familiar. Then he remembered Hopper's story about what happened while she was gone – and what he said when he brought up the name Bob.

"Bob....he's the man who's....gone," El remembered. When she remembered what else Hopper said he was to the Byers, she gasped and wished she never learned to read that drawing.

Just as she was ready to apologize to Will out loud, she heard Will make a loud, sad sound of his own. After he sniffled again, he looked up and showed El eyes that were starting to fill with tears, whether she had permission to see them or not.

"Mom didn't tell me until the next morning. Then she told me over and over it wasn't my fault," Will started. "I don't know if she's lying to me, lying to herself or what. Whatever it is, I know it's not true."

“He told me how to make the monster go away! He didn’t know it was the monster, but still! I failed! *You* could tell the Demogorgon to go away and he did, but I told the shadow monster and he used me to kill people! And him!” Will went on. “Mom told me he really was a hero...but he wouldn’t have to be if it wasn’t for me! Then he wouldn’t have to be dead!”

“I’m really trying not to think about it. Or at least do something good with my memories, like this drawing. But I can’t do it yet. And I sure as hell can’t let Mom see it till I do! She’s cried over him enough without me helping! I’m already enough of a reminder for her now anyway!” Will stated.

“I can go longer without thinking about it now. I don’t know if that makes me worse. When I do think about it, like *really* think about it... I feel like *him* all over again. And this time I can remember all of it! Remember feeling like....*I’m* still the monster.”

At that phrase, El did perhaps the most impulsive thing of her life. Certainly the most impulsive thing that didn’t involve powers. Something she could have never done before arriving in Hawkins, or even during her first few days with Mike and the boys.

She reached out and grabbed Will’s shoulders. Part of it was to make him stop talking. Stop being so angry. Stop saying all those terrible things about himself.

Anything to make him stop hating himself, when she knew he shouldn’t. She couldn’t explain to herself why she was so certain, but she knew she believed it with all her heart.

Now she just needed time to figure out how to tell him. How to make him believe it as strongly as she did. But that wasn’t something she knew how to do.

Yet she made him stop anyway, hoping it would just come to her before he started again. Needing it to come to her.

Mike did it for her all the time. Dustin, Joyce and eventually Lucas did near the end too. Hopper did for most of their time at the cabin. But that was the problem. She was always the problem – the one that

needed to be fixed, saved and told she was better than what she thought she was.

How could someone like her possibly do that for someone else? She never had to before. What was she thinking when she thought she could? And with Mike's best friend, Dustin and Lucas's friend, Joyce's son, Jonathan's brother...what would they say to her when she made him worse? What would they do to her?

No.

No, this wasn't about her.

This was about Will. Someone who actually *didn't* deserve to feel this way.

El begged and pleaded to herself that she'd figure out how to tell him that and make him believe it. How did they make her believe it? When, if ever, did she start to believe it?

It was when...

And then she knew what to say. She just hoped she could say it as well.

Tell Will what his best friend told her on the cliff. Make him believe it like Mike made her believe it.

Because whether or not it was really true about her, she knew, even if Will didn't yet, that it was true about him. And if no one else was coming to tell him right now, then she would try.

So she tried, putting more strength in her voice than she ever did while using her powers. Or maybe even while arguing with Hopper.

"You are *not the monster*, Will."

Saying that out loud – believing it out loud – then cleared her head enough to think of another reason why she was right.

"You saved them. As much as I did."

It kept coming to her, as she remembered the rest of what Hopper said happened at the Byers house before she arrived. "You used the code. Even when the monster was inside you, you used the code and told them. You told them to close the gate. You told them, and then I did it. I couldn't have done it if you didn't tell them!"

Then she remembered what else he did that she couldn't have done. "And you made it in the Upside Down for a week! I was only there a few minutes! I never would have made it as long as you did! I don't know if I would have drawn, or talked to someone new, or saved anyone if I did! But you did, because you're *good*!"

"You think so?" Will struggled to ask after a few seconds.

El was running out of words and memories about what Mike said, or would have said, about her to help her. But then she stopped thinking about Will's best friend, and remembered the words of his mother.

Words she told her that El thought about, and told herself, more than once during the roughest nights in the woods. If they could help El then, they would help Joyce's own son now. And maybe El could even add onto it herself too.

"I think you're very brave, Will. As brave as Hopper or Mike or anyone. You know that?"

El didn't know if her words, let alone Joyce's, were working. Will was still sniffing and still trying not to cry, so it didn't look good. But just as El was convinced she failed, Will made a noise that almost sounded like...laughter.

And his mouth almost looked like it was smiling, even though he was still crying.

"You..." he started, composing his voice until he could properly use it to say, "Thank you." He also got himself to add, "They never said you could talk *that* much. You could talk as much as Dustin now!"

"That's impossible," El said before she could stop herself. Yet she didn't do any better stopping herself from laughing afterwards. Especially when Will started it.

When they finished, Will was the first to use his words again. “Thank you,” he repeated before correcting himself. “No, really...thank you for saving my life. Both times. Especially since you didn’t have to. You were scared and hurt and you didn’t know anyone and you didn’t know me and you shouldn’t have had to...you really didn’t have to.”

He thought she didn’t have to save him.

Will. Will the Wise. Will the Cleric. Will, who was Mike’s best friend. Will, who brought together the first friends El ever had. Will, who had a mother that was one of the only two adults to give her real warmth and kindness. Will, who also helped bring the other adult – her *true* Papa – into her life without knowing it too.

Will, who made almost everything good that El ever had possible – and who suffered far too much while that happened.

And he thought she didn’t have to save him.

“Yes, I did.”

Fortunately, Will stopped arguing with her about it. He didn’t argue when she reached out to hug him either.

El had only ever started a few hugs in her life. Most of them only happened three weeks ago. But like many of the good things she had learned lately, she was starting to get better at this. Maybe better enough to pass them on to someone else.

Yet she was far from done learning. This was made clear again after she and Will stopped hugging and she noticed his music tapes, and she heard how different some of them were from Hopper’s music records. Both in volume and in how her feet moved when she heard them.

Now she knew she had a real chance to never stop learning. She knew she never wanted Mike, Hopper, Dustin, Lucas, Joyce, Nancy and everyone else to stop teaching her. Maybe it was finally time to think that they might not have to.

Maybe she could start learning from new people too. And maybe, just

maybe, she could be good enough to help them too, like they helped her. But they gave and were giving her a whole world, so how could she ever do that much for them?

Maybe there would be time now to find ways to do it together. Maybe with people like Will, such a thing could be done together. If they could do it in the first real hour they spent together, maybe so much more could be done in many more hours.

Yet even in this rare moment of real hope for Eleven – which wouldn't be so rare for much longer – she still couldn't imagine how many more hours were actually lying ahead. With Will, Mike and so many more.

But lie ahead they would now.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Late in her hour at the Byers house, El has a revealing, rewarding and emotional talk with Joyce.

Notes for the Chapter:

Spoilers continue for Stranger Things S2, along with wish fulfillment for El to have more real bonding with Will, Joyce -- and really everyone in the whole gang -- for the real S3.

By the time Joyce came into Will's room, there were seven minutes left until Hopper was scheduled to pick El up. He promised he wouldn't be a second later, and while Joyce didn't know enough about Hopper's current parenting style – not yet, anyway – she didn't doubt he was strict on matters like this.

Maybe too strict? That sounded like a big problem, from the little she'd found out about what he was doing for a whole year behind her – everyone's – back. But like every other day in the last three weeks, there just wasn't enough time now for the *hours* of questions she still had.

Hell, there was barely enough time left now to talk to El. So she quickly asked Will if she could borrow her for a minute, and once she got permission, she led her to her kitchen and was once more thankful that she finished clearing it of Will's...vine drawings last week.

"So...I hope you're not mad that I didn't give this to you earlier," Joyce started, before reaching into her freezer and pulling out a box of Eggos. "I'm sure Hop has a bunch of these at...that place. But now you have an extra one, just in case. And I'll have another box ready to make for you next time you're here, promise."

El couldn't help but smile at the waffles and at someone making her a promise, just like always. It was the first time Joyce got to see it,

though, and it made her smile almost as big and as instinctively. “Oh! And I have a couple more treats you can bring home too!” she remembered before going back into her refrigerator.

As she packed them up, she also said, “I don’t know what you’ve been reading. But I’ll find out from Hopper and I’ll try to get more of those books or magazines or whatever else for you. I can just pass them along to Hop and trust him to give them to you. Now that I can be trusted too.”

It did seem easier, and it felt a lot better, to have Joyce trusted like that. To have Joyce and Hopper work together to...

Then it all came back to El.

The last time she heard Joyce and Hopper’s names said together. And it wasn’t in her mind.

And they weren’t working together to see her. It was to see....

“You saw Mama.”

Joyce turned back around to see El, but didn’t have any words for her. So El said some more. “Terry Ives. You and Hopper saw her. Last year.”

“You know about...” Joyce stopped just short of finishing.

“He didn’t tell me. But I know,” El answered for her, before bringing herself to admit and remember “I saw her too. When I...wasn’t here.”

“You saw her? You went all the way there....by yourself?” Joyce asked. El’s lack of an answer was an answer, although it raised a bunch more questions about how she did it, how she could possibly have done it alone, and what she was thinking going out there all by herself.

But those questions seemed less important than the fact that she got back anyway. And they really became irrelevant when Joyce realized what El must have seen when she got there. “So you saw her. And could she...see you back? Could she talk to you?” Joyce hoped against hope for a minute.

It was dashed anyway when El said, “Just with lights.”

Damned lights. Joyce barely stopped herself from saying that out loud, but she was able to say, “I’m sorry, El,” which was better if not happier to say.

“The bad men. Really hurt her,” El reflected once again.

“They hurt far too many people,” Joyce agreed.

“I saw one of them,” El admitted for the first time to someone in Hawkins. Admitted to someone else before she admitted it to Hopper.

Once again, she told herself that not telling Hopper everything about Chicago...about Kali...about the bad man and his kids...wasn’t lying. But like all those other times, it didn’t make her feel less afraid about what would happen, and what he would say, if she did tell him. Maybe it wouldn’t lead to a fight like that night in the cabin, but if there was a chance it would...

And yet she couldn’t keep it all inside now. Not after what she said. And not after looking at Joyce. She looked at her in a way that made El want to tell her everything – and made her so scared that she wouldn’t look at her like that any more if she knew. Really *knew* her.

She knew El as a brave girl who saved her son. She didn’t know the El who killed people, who opened gates that brought out monsters, who put her son in danger in the first place, and who almost left children all alone without their parents just like bad men.

Hopper did know that El, and he still cared about her. So did Mike and the boys. But the thought of Joyce knowing and feeling different...it gave her a kind of fear she didn’t even have when she closed the gate.

Yet she didn’t see a way out of it now. Except for lying. And friends don’t lie. And she *really* didn’t want to lie to her.

She just told El she could be trusted now. Maybe it was time to really do that.

“When I wasn’t here, I saw a bad man. I wanted to hurt him, like he

hurt Mama. I almost did. But..."

What was the right word?

She didn't? That was true, but it didn't feel like the whole story. She couldn't? She certainly could have done it, even when she saw his children. She wouldn't? That wasn't true at all until the very end.

She *had* to get this right. Maybe...maybe if one word wasn't enough, she could use them all.

"I wouldn't do it. I wanted to real bad, but I couldn't. So I didn't....do what the bad man would have done," El settled on. "Was that good?"

"I can't think of anything better," Joyce replied, instantly melting El's fears away. "That is the very best reason not to. Of course, there aren't that many to begin with."

El's puzzled silence helped fuel Joyce to go further. "I had to see those men in that lab more than I ever wanted. Sure, they kept saying they weren't the same men, and they didn't fake anyone's death this time, but still! Every time I went there, I wished at least once that I could hurt them. *Really* hurt them. For what they did to Will, to you, me, everyone!"

"But you...*couldn't*," El worked out. "You had to help Will."

"Yeah," Joyce sighed. "If I didn't have him, and I had your powers, then....let's just say you're a lot stronger than me."

"But I was so angry..." El reflected again.

"That can make you do things you never thought you could. I know," Joyce assured, flashing back to the first and thus far only time she'd been in El's home. Erasing those memories and Will's horrible screams, at least for a little while, Joyce tried to joke, "I held back in there for Will, but if that Brenner had been there this year...I know I would have ripped that son of a bitch's face off before Halloween! Then he'd *wish* that monster would have finished him!"

Joyce soon realized that joke/more than half truth would have worked better on anyone else but El. Yet El just stayed quiet,

worrying Joyce while she probably should have apologized in the meantime.

“When I was away, someone made me think hurting bad men was good. Like Papa did. But she made me feel better. At first,” El explained without quite explaining everything. “I thought I could save people from them this time. But when I was there, it didn’t feel like it. Not like...” El paused to find the right words again. “Not like when I came back. Not like with my friends.”

“Well, you did save them. There’s no doubt about that,” Joyce said. “You saved everyone.”

She did save everyone that was there when she got back. But before she did....there was one other person. One person she just finished talking about with Will. One person that she had heard Joyce liked a lot. But he wasn’t here now.

Because *she* wasn’t there then.

“Not everyone....” El realized, as many more terrible things were clear to her now.

Like that Bob Newby Superhero’s death wasn’t Will’s fault. El always believed that, but now she knew another big reason why.

“It’s *my* fault....”

The fear came back stronger than ever. But El had to tell her. She now knew Joyce should hate her for what she did – and didn’t do – and maybe it would help Will stop blaming himself for good too. It was better they knew who to blame now.

It was better this way.

“I shouldn’t have left,” she started. “I should have been here. I should have come back faster. I could have gone there in time and saved him. I didn’t, and he’s gone because I was....stupid.”

El saw Joyce gasp, surely realizing the truth now. The first of El’s tears flooded her eyes, to the point she couldn’t look at Joyce anymore. The next time she did, she’d tell her to get out of her house

and never come back anyway.

The very least she could do is say she was sorry, while she had time.

“You liked Bob, and he’s gone because of me. Because I wasn’t here to save him, and I could have been. I’m sorry....” El got out as she turned her head further, unable to even wipe her tears away. She’d wait until Joyce threw her out to do that.

“No.” El heard.

No, she didn’t accept her apology. No, she didn’t believe her, but she would soon enough and then yell. No, she wouldn’t let a *monster* like El near her or her son anymore. It had to be one of those. What else could it be?

El just kept looking away, waiting for Joyce to start yelling. Instead, she heard her walk right to her and kneel down – then saw Joyce lift her face up to make El look at her.

When El could finally see her, she saw that Joyce indeed looked angry. But this wasn’t an angry face that looked like Hopper’s during that fight. Or like Papa when she didn’t behave. Or even like Lucas’s when he yelled at her.

This was something she couldn’t explain. So she waited for Joyce to try.

“*Don’t* you blame yourself for *one* second.”

It came out of Joyce as ferociously as it would if she was talking to Will, or Jonathan. Which actually made sense to her.

She had seen Will apologize over and over for things that weren’t his fault for months. She had heard him cry in her arms, and cry at night as quietly as he could, too many times the last three weeks. She knew how he was trying not to blame himself and was often failing, no matter how much he hid it from her, and no matter how much she was trying and often failing to start taking a step back.

But to see it from El right now?

No.

Not this time. Not this girl. Not this brave, powerful, special girl.

Not this girl who'd been trained to fear and hate herself all her life, who'd been locked up from the world for so long – even now by someone who actually cared for her and loved her – and who still gave Joyce her son back twice.

Not while she was here. Not anymore.

This filled her with the kind of righteous fury she usually saved for saving her children. Or for Hopper when she tried to solve Will's map and went through those tunnels to get him.

A damned smoke monster couldn't even stand up to that. It had been proven. So she would be the damned one if she let the monstrous self-hatred of this precious girl do any better. So she would drive it out too. But with words, not heaters.

"I've blamed them, me, and a few other things for Bob. But not you. *Never* you," Joyce swore to El. "As far as I'm concerned, there's one thing more to blame than anyone. And I already burned that bastard out of my son."

Joyce had too much momentum to mind her language now. So she powered on. "Me, Jonathan and Nancy got him out. But you *kept* him out. You kept them all out and you're here and alive and....with Hopper..." she laughed enough to break her momentum. "That's still so crazy..."

Joyce once again pushed aside how crazy it was, to once again get back to a more important task at hand. "But anyway, now Will's free for good. Now you're alive, and because of you and him....what happened to Will, Bob, that Barbara girl, and so many others will never happen again. That....well, it really helps me to know all that."

"It does?" El asked, not able to look her completely in the eye yet.

However, when Joyce took a while to answer, El finally looked right at her again. She saw her eyes water again, and saw her take a deep breath before saying, "It *has* to."

El didn't feel afraid anymore. Yet looking at Joyce, she didn't really feel any better either. But in a different way now. And Joyce wasn't angry, but she didn't look like she was okay either.

El willed herself to think of something and say something. She remembered she didn't have much time to do it, which didn't really help. So she started saying the first things she could think of.

"The bad men...aren't here anymore," she remembered out loud. "The gate is closed," she said as she started to see what it all meant. "So...they can't hurt Will anymore."

"We sure hope so," Joyce sighed, telling herself she believed it more than she actually believed it. Which gave El a surge of inspiration.

"They can't hurt Will anymore," she repeated, but with more conviction and force behind it. The more she felt it run through her, the more she realized what else she had to say. What else she had to do.

"I won't let them."

The surge she felt was like the one at the train and at the gate. But different. There was anger there for certain, but it wasn't just anger. It felt like anything...it felt like when she faced and defeated the Demogorgon. Like when she saved Mike, Dustin and Lucas.

When she protected them. With her life, she thought at the time.

For all the angry power she felt and needed to close the gate, it didn't feel like that. It didn't feel...complete. She was starting to see that the more she thought about it these last few weeks. And she saw the difference even clearer now.

As she looked at Joyce and thought of Will, El stood straight and tall, compelled to give the most unbreakable oath she knew.

"I *promise*," she vowed. "I won't let them hurt your family anymore."

Joyce imagined this was what it felt like to be on the other end of her rampages. It was nothing like she imagined and remembered El to be from last year, or even those few moments from three weeks ago. The

clothes and Hopper should have been a dead giveaway that this wasn't the old El, but it didn't become crystal clear until right now.

It was overwhelming. Much like the first time she learned a little girl actually had magic powers that could save a little boy. A girl who had survived so much torture and terrible experiments, and still volunteered to save that little boy. To see her vow that all over again, like this, and to vow it for "your" whole family....

She did get that part wrong in a way, though.

There was still so much to do, so much to learn, so much to mourn and clear up and clean up and so much to get to know. But as premature and early as it was, Joyce just...knew.

Knew she didn't want El to just think of the Byers' as "your" family.

"Then I want to make you a promise too," she offered. Once she sorted out exactly what the rest of the offer was, she kneeled down to face El again.

"I know Hopper is your family now. And I know Mike and the boys are more than family to you," Joyce recapped. "But someday, once you're free to go into the world and everything's normal again...I hope you can think of my family like *your* family too."

She wanted El to think that?

"I've learned the hard way that I can't keep promises to keep my family safe. Not alone," Joyce continued. "I'm still learning, but it's really hard. But I just try to remember that I'm not alone. And neither are they. So what I can promise is....if there's anything me, Will or Jonathan can do to help you see you're not alone anymore, and you *never* have to be again...we will be here for you as much as we possibly can."

"Not alone?" El tried to accept.

"Yes. I know you're not alone now. But you can never have too many friends. Or people who care about you like family, whether they are or not. And it's about time you had so, so many of those," Joyce teared up all over again. "I just want you to know me and my family

will always be people like that, as long as you want us to be. Whether you need to protect us or not. Okay?"

This kind of promise, and the feelings that went with it, was not something El was used to or was completely convinced was real yet. And yet, she felt like she understood it. She felt how important it was to Joyce. And she felt like...she hadn't had nearly enough of it.

"That would really help," El admitted in a tearful whisper.

"I'm glad," Joyce said almost as quietly. She then spoke up a bit more to say, "Also, whenever you have more time to visit....I would love to hear *everything* about how you've been living with Hopper. Just to see if there's anything else you guys need, any really funny or sweet stories you have, that kind of thing."

"I think I can do that," El halfway promised. But it was enough to keep Joyce smiling and looking at her like she was...enough. That was more than enough on its own.

For good measure, Joyce used her finger to clear away those peaky remaining tears under El's eyes. Once El noticed Joyce still had some under her own, she mimicked her and tried to brush them away too. She couldn't tell if it was working, but Joyce was still smiling and laughing anyway, so it was doing something.

It was doing something else beyond that as well. It was reminding El of the feeling she had on the way to meet her Mama. The feeling that when she got there, her Mama would be able to talk to her, hug her, make her smile and laugh and do everything she never got to do with her for the last 12 years.

Those dreams never came true, and somewhere inside, she wasn't surprised they didn't. All she had was the nice feeling that they could be, before reality ruined everything.

Yet now she had that feeling again. Only it was real. Only it was with another child's mama. A mama who acted like the one El could only have dreamt about, only different. Only so much more.

But before El could think about what that meant even more, she

heard a familiar, not quite top secret anymore knock.

It was time for Papa to get her.

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Before Hopper got El out of the Byers house, Will raced out of his room to tell her goodbye. And to promise that he would finish another drawing of her – this time of how she looked now – before the next time she visited.

Joyce said goodbye after handing Hopper El's new bag of treats, and after giving her one more big hug. When she did, El saw Hopper looking at her kind of funny. He had a face on that almost looked like...one Mike had when he looked at her a lot of the time. She'd have to ask Hopper about that later.

But in the car ride home, as El lay down under the back seat, she tried to focus on and remember how she felt at the Byers house, with Will and Joyce. It wasn't something she wanted to forget for a long time, if ever.

It was something she wanted to feel for a lot more days with them very soon, if that was possible.

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It wound up taking a few years, a few more gates, and a few more encounters with 'sisters' and 'brothers' that made El decide who she wanted her real family to be.

But when it was all settled once and for all, she realized and accepted that she could keep and grow that feeling around Joyce and Will. And add it with Jonathan too.

And she would eventually get to feel all of it every single day.

THE END